“Insurgencies don’t have a plan —they *are* the plan. Vanishing mediators and viral politics”

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In “Shoplifters of the World Unite” (*London Review of Books*, 19 August 2011), Slavoj Žižek characterizes the riots in the UK as a “zero-degree protest, a violent action demanding nothing”. Participants had no message to deliver and resembled more what Hegel called the rabble than an emerging revolutionary subject. The problem for him is not street violence as such but its lack of self-assertiveness, “impotent rage and despair masked as a display of force; it is envy masked as triumphant carnival”.

This absence of demands is not necessarily an absence of meaning. Impotent rage is one of many possible responses of people whose future has been wagered and lost before they learn to walk. Britain has the worst social mobility among OECD countries and is one of the most unequal places in the developed world: only Portugal scores a worse Gini coefficient. Rioters are the inhabitants of the bleak council estates (the local *banlieus*) that make up the Little Britain of a country that for some reason still thinks of itself as Great Britain. Martin Amis’ *London Fields* (“Darts Keith, darts”) and Pulp’s *Common People* (“Dance, and drink, and screw because there’s nothing else to do”) offer us vignettes of their dead end prospects without dressing it up with the moralizing narrative of victimhood.

But just when you expect Žižek to deliver a looter’s guide to designer clothes and flat screen TVs he moves the conversation in a different direction. He focuses on the Arab uprisings that toppled ruling dynasties of corrupt autocrats and on the Spanish *indignados* who camped in public squares just before the May elections to protest against the disconnect between elected officials and everyday life. Žižek is sympathetic towards these revolts but outright pessimistic about their prospects. He asks us to “avoid the temptation of the narcissism of the lost cause: it is too easy to admire the sublime beauty of uprisings doomed to fail”. This is a disconcerting piece of advice coming from someone who wrote a book titled *In defense of Lost Causes*. Why are his lost causes worth defending and others narcissistic dead ends? Why are Egypt and Spain false positives of emancipation if the lost causes he endorses fail just as unceremoniously? His criterion is whether they have a plan. The recent ones didn’t, which is why they “express an authentic rage which is not able to transform itself into a positive programme of sociopolitical change. They express the spirit of revolt without revolution”. Their failure is the failure to come up with a proposal to replace the given. Without a plan, revolts lack the dignity of revolutions and, unless they get lucky, are headed to the cul-de-sac of lost causes of the narcissistic kind.

You don’t need a program to now which way the wind of change blows

This is unconvincing. Recent insurgencies confront us not with a lack of plans but with the loss of the loss, a Hegelian trope that Žižek once described most elegantly and persuasively as the realization that we never had what we thought we had lost. It is an affirmative loss that refers to

the withering away of a cognitive map or grammar of emancipation that was never there to begin with, at least not in actual uprisings: having a clear alternative to the existing order comes handy but has rarely played a role in rebellions. Consider the insurgencies of 2011 —the Maghreb and Spain, Yemen and Syria, Chile and Israel. They are full of chants about human rights and democracy, free and secular education, affordable housing, "Tahrir Tel Aviv", real democracy, "If you don't let us dream we won't let you sleep" or out with the corrupt and incompetent politicos, but no discernible proposal for a new order. Neither was there one in rebellions that preceded them, like the *Caracazo* in Venezuela, the Water and Gas wars in Bolivia and the *Que se vayan todos, que no quede ni uno solo* in Argentina ("All of them must go, not a single one can stay"). The same dynamics appear in pro-democracy movements in the Mediterranean rim, Latin America and Eastern Europe in the 1970s and 1980s. They had a hazy understanding of democracy. Activists and onlookers saw it mostly as something different (and arguably better) than what they had to endure at the time. Democracy less as a type of regime than as a chance that they would no longer risk losing their jobs, going to prison or having various parts of their anatomy disfigured for expressing their opposition to the ruling Junta, party or strongman. People were fighting for their dignity and their future and had no blueprint or navigation map of what would come later. Like contemporary revolts, they simply wanted their voices to be counted, although current ones have the added component of trying to avoid the fate of the 'vagabond', Zygmunt Bauman's name for the chronic casualties of adjustment policies and globalization processes. In brief, their talking points about participation and the prospect of a better life hardly count as a plan or alternative to the existing order. This is the norm rather than the exception; to think otherwise is to look at the poetry of revolts through the rear mirror of rationalist narratives.

I take this absence of blueprints to be what Jacques Derrida had in mind when he spoke of justice, democracy and hospitality *à venir*, to come. To say that they remain to come is not the same as to claim that one is clueless about what is going on, like expecting parents who refuse to know the sex of their unborn child. Every epoch dreams the next, says Michelet, except that these dreams are images of thought that never add up to a model. Democracy, like justice and hospitality, will never cease to arrive but will already start to occur as we strive to make them happen. This is not a modified version of Humpty Dumpty's solipsism: in collective action, neither words nor action mean what we want them to mean. So to say that they start to happen as we work for their realization is to speak of the performative layer of emancipatory politics. This gives us a bridge to what Žižek calls enacted utopia. I quote him: "in the short circuit between the present and the future, we are —as if by Grace— for a brief period of time allowed to act *as if* the utopian future were … already at hand, just there to be grabbed". Then he adds: "we *already are free fighting for freedom, we are already happy while fighting for happiness*, no matter how difficult the circumstances". If performatives refer to utterances that are inseparable from the action they announce, political performatives designate something like the sneak preview of an unreleased movie: you can already talk about it before the commercial release. Similarly, political performatives anticipate something to come because participants already begin to live the experience of what they are fighting for while they fight for it. This is the stuff of all emancipatory politics. Enacted utopia encompasses such politics and performatives and it is different from the dreamed non-place of conventional utopias: it already anticipates something to come as people start to be what they strive to become instead of instead of shining like an ideal that will forever remain in the limbo of discursive purity. Žižek seems to toy with the

performative side of enacted utopia. Hence the argumentative shift from the hypothetical “as if” of freedom and happiness to an affirmative stumping of the ground —we “already are” free and happy— even if it is a de facto rather than de jure happiness (although one would have to make the case that happiness can be anything but de facto). None of this requires a program to describe the future or a road map to get there.

Jacques Rancière formulates this idea nicely. He says: “the framing of a future happens in the wake of political invention rather than being its condition of possibility. Revolutionaries invented a ‘people’ before inventing its future”. The people are the part that has no part, the part of the uncounted or has been counted as homeless and property-less but refuses to accept what they are supposed to be, say or see. The uncounted identify themselves with names like equality, liberty or dignity that have no place in the existing field of experience; they are improper names, at least in the present order, but they could come into being in a different place. This is because emancipatory politics is about opening up new possibilities and not designing the new order. They are symptoms of our becoming other. Like rabbit-holes of the *Alice in Wonderland* variety, insurgencies are passageways that connect the present with the possibility of something different to come.

Insurgencies as vanishing mediators

These passageways turn emancipatory revolts into vanishing mediators, an expression Frederic Jameson coined nearly forty years ago to account for the role of Protestantism in the passage from a pre-modern world to contemporary capitalism. The Protestant ethic is shorthand for the dissemination of instrumental rationality required for capitalism to flourish. This mediator eventually vanished not because people gave up their faith in God or stopped going to church but because capitalism was by then quite capable of managing on its own. Žižek is fond of this concept but like Jameson he overlooks its undecidable nature by focusing on mediators that do their job and vanish. One way of factoring undecidability into the equation is by reference to performative utterances in speech act theory. We could then distinguish *felicitous* mediators from those that *misfire*, that is, insurgencies that usher in a different order and then vanish and combats for emancipation that go nowhere in their efforts to modify the field of experience. There is no principle of necessity determining which will be felicitous and which will misfire. Insurgencies that misfire are lost causes not because they lack a clear idea of their itinerary and destination but because their enemies outsmart them, because insurgencies implode under the weight of their internal squabbles and many other reasons. Which will become a narcissistic lost cause and which will have a chance of losing in a dignified matter (or even become successful) depends on the fortunes of contingency.

Undecidability is also at work in the way we account for the “vanishing” of vanishing mediators. Nothing really vanishes without a trace —not a divorce, the elation of victory, or the experience of missed opportunities. What is gone lingers in our memory and conditions our affects and behavior, at least for a while. Let me formulate this idea of a lingering or spectral presence of what is gone after it has done what it has to do by reference to the theory of transitions to democracy. More specifically, the theory resulting from the multi-continent study of democratization sponsored by the Wilson Center in the 1980s. Guillermo O’Donnell and Philippe

Schmitter wrote the tentative conclusions. They describe transitions as the interregnum — literally, as what occurs in-between two kingdoms— between authoritarian and democratic regimes and outline the critical path or standard itinerary they will follow. Transitions begin with the emergence of tensions and divisions between hawks and doves in the ruling coalition. This reduces the chances of consensus among rulers, relaxes the enforcement of prohibitions, enables a haphazard toleration of civil liberties that gives some breathing space for dissidents and eventually triggers the resurrection of civil society. Social movements have a pivotal role in this resurrection: they lead the demands for democracy because political parties are either disbanded, harassed, in disarray or function as convenient alibis for the government to claim some kind of democratic façade. This is the moment of glory of movements. The transition ends when new democratic rules are in place, political parties are allowed to operate freely and the country holds founding elections. Once this has happened parties reclaim what is rightfully theirs, the running of politics, and social movements, having done what they had to do, leave the stage and return to, well, the social. They are simply the understudies of political parties that step in during the state of exception of transitions and then vanish from the political scene.

The problem with this narrative is that it is wrong. Movements might have functioned as the vanishing mediators of democracy but they stuck to the political stage instead of going home after they did their job. This is partly because they themselves didn't know they were doing someone else's job. They simply did what came naturally. So to speak, if you want to change a state of affairs —you either do something or brave yourself for more time with whatever dimwitted autocrat without clothes that happens to rule your life. Movements became fixtures of politics alongside political parties and helped to configure our current post-liberal scenario where territorial representation coexists with other ways and means of aggregating wills, processing demands and staging opposition. This is not an accident in the otherwise normal working of vanishing mediators. It is part of their structure of possibilities. As mentioned, things vanish, but rarely without a trace. Now we can complete this thought by saying that whether they vanish, as Jameson says about the Protestant ethics, or linger, as in the example of social movements, these mediators are more than midwifes of a mode of production, a regime or a new conceptual structure. They don't have a relationship of pure and simple exteriority with the outcome they are supposed to facilitate: they also contribute to shape the scene they help to bring about and are therefore operators of constituent power.

The aftermath of unplanned revolts

Three conclusions and one corollary follow from this. The first one is obvious. Insurgencies in Egypt and Spain might be lost causes but we can't peg their failure to the absence of a script. Failure will be a contingent outcome of their actions regardless of whether they have a plan or not. So even if Žižek is masquerading as a Cartesian evil genie, he won't trick them into believing they are nothing as long as they think they are something.

Secondly, the events that supercharged 2011 might be episodic, condemned to be drowned in the sea of normality of politics as usual. So what? All insurgencies are episodic. Emancipatory politics is not a perpetual present of revolt but an effort to pierce the continuum of history. It occurs, as Rancière put it with regard to politics, "as an always provisional accident within the

history of forms of domination". Walter Benjamin understood this well when he spoke of a history of domination punctured from time to time by the blips of rebellion. Revolutions aim to disrupt the time of domination, which is why he was so taken by the image of French revolutionaries shooting at the clocks of town clocks: this symbolized their desire to blow up the chronological time of domination. Michael Löwy updates this Benjaminian trope. In 1992 many countries were preparing to celebrate 500 years of Columbus' arrival to America. Red O Globo, Brazil's largest television and communications conglomerate, erected a digital clock on the rooftop of its corporate headquarters to count the time remaining for 12 October. The indigenous population, says Löwy, had nothing to celebrate and shot arrows at the clock to prevent it from further registering the times of their submission.

The third consequence has to do with the way we assess failure. Many of the revolts of 2011 will fail if we measure success in terms of regime change (assuming we agree on the critical mass or quantum of change required to speak of meaningful change). But even if they fail, they will have left an intangible and often overlooked specter of emancipatory politics roaming among us. I am referring to the displacement of cognitive maps or frameworks through which we think about our way of being in community.

Let me use two examples to illustrate this. One refers to the way people perceive power and the powerful. An entire generation of Egyptians, Tunisians, Libyans, Syrians and Yemenis grew under the shadow of a single strongman and his cronies. They experienced a continual assault on their will to act. The mechanisms of this assault are familiar. They include the cult of personality that turns the leader into the First Citizen, First Soldier, First Sportsman, First Lover, and First Whatever of the nation; the paranoia-inducing belief in the ever-present eyes and ears of the police and their informants; the terror generated by persecution and repression; the many forms of consent to corruption, and so on. The goal of this pounding of the will is to make the population feel like the anguished characters in Luis Buñuel's *The Exterminating Angel*: people at a dinner party spend the evening at a mansion but for some reason they are unable to leave even though the room has no doors. Tyrants seek the same effect: the paralyzing myth of an impotent population facing an omnipotent, omnipresent and irreplaceable regime and leader (*Apres moi, le deluge*!). Insurgencies show that it is possible to undo the demobilizing spell of power. They change people's frames of reference by offering windows of possibility, the rabbit holes I described as passageways to other (this-worldly) worlds. They precipitate an enhanced connectivity between bodies whereby participants and onlookers feel, for a fleeting moment, that they can almost touch the sky with their hands. As usual, the rhythm and direction of change might be co-opted and colonized by political entrepreneurs. But even they realize that the awe for power and the powerful has taken a hit. Power loses its sacral aura when people witness the spectacle of confused tyrants put on trial, gone into hiding or fleeting abroad with the public monies looted during their time in government. This is the existential pedagogy of emancipatory politics and it is foolish to dismiss it as subjective gibberish. Its lessons are likely to linger long after the effervescence of the streets subsides.

The second example of shifts in our matrixes of perception takes us to Chile, a country with the highest cost of education among OECD countries after the United States and a President who claims that education is a consumer good. High school and university students have mounted a

challenge to privatized education. Their mobilizations in demand of free public education have been happening for a while and have had strong public support. Their repertory of actions ranges from massive demonstrations (400,000 plus people in demonstrations across the country) to the takeover of schools (over 600) and universities and guerrilla theatre activities. They have staged kiss-a-thons for free education a flash mob of zombies (students see themselves as the living dead of a dysfunctional educational system) dancing to the music of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* across from the Presidential palace, a 1800 hour urban marathon —one hour for each million U$ required to fund the education of 300,000 students per year.

The student revolt disturbs the given in at least two ways. First, it puts into question the post-Pinochet obsession with consensus. The Chilean brand of democracy considers radical political demands to be memories of a long gone past. They have been replaced by the technical discourse of suited people with professional agendas and little passion. This is partly due to the way in which institutional discourse processed (or failed to process) the aftermath of the traumatic overthrow Allende in 1973. It was a hypocritical consensus. People rarely refer to Pinochet's rule as barbarian ("coup" and "difficult times" will do, just like "the troubles" is the euphemism of choice in Northern Ireland). However, the right-wing coalition that glorified Pinochet without much concern for the dead, the missing and the ones who went into exile have no qualms about labeling protesting students as subversives or slamming Salvador Allende as a godless Marxist who ruined Chile. The adversarial politics spearheaded by students might have nudged the country out of the prolonged state of exception in which it had been living for almost three decades. And second, student revolts undermine the success story that Chileans have been telling themselves for the past three decades: that the country is different, safer, more rational and better off than the rest. It is a country where the market works. Business-speak is so prevalent across classes, ages and occupations that it is a virtual second nature. It is only comparable to the ubiquitous managerial language permeating everyday discourse in UK universities, where something that is not subject to assessment is suspicious and Heads of Department are called line managers. Student protests highlight the class divisions of the educational system and its lifelong consequences on social mobility; they have tripped the neoliberal economic model from the immunitarian privilege that it has had in Chile. Questioning the market is no longer taboo, consensus is less of an obsession, and the vector of politics has moved from ballroom dancing in Congress to dancing in the streets. Change will probably come about through the encounter of these different performers and dancing traditions.

A viral politics and connectivity

Let me close by discussing a corollary that emerges from these insurgencies. It is that in all of them we find variants of viral connectivity and politics. At the more general level, "viral" refers to ideas, practices, symbols and so on that can induce people to replicate them in such a way that multiple copies are produced independently and enter into circulation as others generate more copies. People do the replication but nobody co-ordinates the process.

A conceptual take on viral politics and diffusion means at least two things. One is that in all the experiences I have mentioned, from Tunisia to Chile, command and control units like political parties and social organizations are not particularly relevant for the convergence of people that

set into motion communities of action. Yes, organizations were not absent, but they functioned more like nodes in a wider, loosely defined network than as the prime movers of protests. The second thing about the viral connectivity is that it shows the inadequacy of the body as the archetypical representation of the events in the streets. Totality is a misnomer if it is used to mean a unified entity or, alternatively, it becomes a name for the haphazard coming together of singularities to do something in concert. There is no body, whether a body politic or any other here. Drawing from the metaphor Francisco Basterra used to characterize Wikileaks in *El País*, we can say that Wikipedia, instant mobs, Linux and the various insurgencies of 2011 can be compared to "a flock of individual birds that can only be identified by what they do together".

The question then is whether this is something new or not. My hunch is that it isn't. Jon Beasley-Murray writes in his book *Post-Hegemony* that there is no hegemony and there never was. I want to recall the metaphor I used about Žižek earlier on, namely, that to fault insurgencies for not coming up with a plan is like looking at them through the rear mirror of narratives of emancipation that were never there to begin with. Viral connectivity has probably been around in collective action all along but we failed to perceive it due to rationalist cognitive maps. We have become more aware of it in the past half a century or so. Many people contributed to the development of this sensibility. They include Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's rhizomes, their intriguing ex-centric systems of multiple entry points, Michael Hardt and Tony Negri's *Empire* and the multitude as a political subject, and Manuel Castels' *Network Society*. The actual pioneers are engineers. One is Lotfi Zadeh, who familiarized us with fuzzy logic and sets to break loose from standard logic and its obliviousness to complexity. The other is Paul Baran, who proposed a distributed communications systems so that the US Air Force could go on operating after a first-wave nuclear attack by the Soviets knocked out much of its communications network.

This has very little to do with the much-hyped role of social media such as Twitter and Facebook, video-sharing sites like YouTube, and the Internet and mobile phones in recent revolts. The accelerated pace of connectivity and the possibility of circulating information that circumvented governmental controls facilitated things for people who were fed up and wanted to change their worlds. But people were too quick to confuse the use of this media with its role in generating insurgencies. In an article in *The Huffington Post* the architectural scholar Paul Gunther was one of the first to warn us that social media can only work as an aide to protesters when there is a place to go. "The square knows all", he says. "It bears witness. As its meaning comes finally and only from the human actions it allows". Tahrir square in Cairo, Plaza del Sol in Madrid, the Zócalo in Mexico City, Bahrain's Pearl Square, and so on. In Chile it is not a square but a street, the Alameda, which President Salvador Allende mentioned in his final speech the day of the coup by saying, "Sooner than later free people will walk again through the wide Alamedas".

The symbolic and logistic importance of physical space modifies two things. It blunts one of the criticisms leveled against Jürgen Habermas for limiting his conception of the public sphere to face-to-face encounters among co-present individuals. The criticism was not wrong —Habermas does disregard the virtual encounters made possible by the media as a site and a modality of public space— but people were too quick to minimize the role of physical encounters in the public sphere of late modernity. The other impact of this practical valorization of physical pace is that it undermines some of the proposals put forward by the Critical Art Ensemble in the early to

mid- 1990s. This New York collective drew from the work of Deleuze and Guattari for their pioneering work on media and politics and their thesis concerning electronic civil disobedience. They perceived earlier than most people that the Internet was not only a means of communication but also a site of political struggle. Their claim that disobedience had shifted from the streets to cyberspace proved to be less prescient.